

Texas Rural Water Association: Awards Committee

System-Wide Awards Nomination for, Dripping Springs Water Supply Corporation

Submitted January 30, 2023: Written by: AJ Gray

Droughts are nothing new to Texans, but each time a drought hits, water supplies are forced to issue restrictions. In 2022 the drought that gripped Central Texas was different from years past. With an explosion of growth over the last decade, water use in the Central Texas area grew exponentially. Thus, causing greater draw down in aquifer levels than had ever been previously recorded. Mr. Gray worked tirelessly through the summer monitoring and managing the system to prevent Dripping Springs WSC customers from slipping further into drought restrictions and ensuring that emergency services had water available for the multiple fires that tore through Central Texas.

In 2009 Mr. Gray began his career with the Dripping Springs WSC as an unlicensed maintenance tech, repairing leaks and assisting operators with their tasks. Over the course of his career, he has held multiple roles at the water supply improving his skills and system knowledge year after year. In 2011, the Board of Directors promoted him to field supervisor, soon after he achieved his Class A water Operators license and in 2021, Mr. Gray was promoted to the role of Operations General Manager. During his time at Dripping Springs WSC, Mr. Gray took great pride in being innovative and producing new and more efficient ways to operate the water system. His insight into the operation of the WSC system has been instrumental aiding in the growth of the system and especially during emergencies over the last decade.

During his fourteen-year career at the WSC Mr. Gray has accomplished millions of dollars' worth of improvement into the system. Some of the main improvements include replacing miles of aged waterlines, replacing standpipes with elevated tanks, upgrading pumps and motors to operate off VFDs. AMR and AMI metering was upgraded and installed so the administrative staff could better assist customers with their bills due to high water usage. Software updates upgraded the SCADA system to collect more data and to allow for more operator control of the distribution system. Lastly the installation of pressure transducers in wells helped monitor the level of the water. All these improvements would collectively assist Mr. Gray in the management of the system during the 2022 drought.

In the early parts of June 2022, aquifer levels were dropping at a staggering rate of one foot a day. At that rate, the WSC customers would be entering into a severe drought that could force all outdoor water use to stop by mid-July. Unsatisfied with that potential outcome Mr. Gray swiftly implemented a policy that would reduce the rate of drawdown in the aquifer, while still providing customers with ability to water twice a week. Utilizing the storage capacity in the elevated tanks Mr. Gray began slowing the water down in the system during non-peak times and installed solenoid valves between pressure zones to allow for extended shut down periods at the wells. For this to work Mr. Gray would work eighteen hours a day in the office and remotely. Mr. Gray worked weekends and while on vacation with his family. By controlling the variable pump speeds from his phone, he was able to ensure that tank levels remained full during non-peak times. This personal water management allowed emergency services to fight the multiple wildfires that Hays County experienced and provided water availability when the peak demand hit later that night. This high-level service management enabled the well fields a much-needed brake but provided much security for the community. Allowing the wells to only operate during peak times, he was

able to reduce the rate of drawdown from one foot per day to one foot per week. His outside of the box thinking allowed the water supply to generate over half a million dollars in additional operating revenue over the summer, prevented Dripping Springs WSC customers from going further into water restrictions and saved customers thousands of dollars in landscape replacement cost.

His dedication to the WSC is mostly unknown to the community. His continued insight and forethought into the WSC system provide valuable information to an area that continues to grow with seemingly no end in sight. Ensuring that the current and future customers of Dripping Springs WSC continue to receive clean and safe drinking water no matter the work it may entail.

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Submitted January 30, 2023: Written by Rick Broun

What we take for granted isn't much of a surprise for most anymore and hasn't been in a long, long time. We turn on the lights and behold, we are no longer hidden in darkness but wrapped in light. Just keep your truck gassed up and travel anywhere in the country, though most people would agree that the Hill Country bests most other states. Texans love to talk about beer, but can't we agree it's mostly water, granted frozen water, that keeps our beer cold. Without water you and I wouldn't be here today to read this article and further without pristine water to drink we'd not be here at all. So, who can we thank for the water we so desperately need each moment of the day. Who is this person who helps us function so we can turn on lights, travel to Dripping Springs and have a cold beer?

Firstly, we must describe such a person, someone who works in a water utility, a water operator, but not just any old run of the mill guy in jeans holding a meter in one hand and a wrench in the other. No sir, what I need to describe to you is a lead water operator. Yeah, this guy knows what it takes to get not only the job done, but he has the confidence, experience, and can-do attitude that makes most situations look easy. Interestingly enough, and you can look it up too, but I looked up the word, operator. What popped up on my web search was, "a skillful person who knows how to circumvent difficulties" and "*a binding site in a DNA chain*". To me, these definitions hit the nail on the head, yes, the head of a lead water operator.

Allow me to introduce to you one of Central Texas' finest, Cory Taylor. His talent in the business of water operations is glaringly obvious to those closest to him, including our customers who he interacts with daily. The office wall is covered with his licenses that are proudly displayed; honors framed in glass. He has served the community of Dripping Springs for the past seven years and is currently working to complete his A license. Cory's success isn't summed up on paper, hung on the wall and forgotten. It's his innate ability to see past a problem and seek the best resolution not just for the water supply corporation he works for, but also the customers he serves. This is evident as he challenged himself to increase efficiency in chemical use through additional water testing and monitoring. Cory was able to reduce chemical consumption while maintaining chlorine residuals in the system saving our customers tens of thousands of dollars every year. You may think that's enough for Cory, but it's not even close. To him, if he's not using his skills in the field, he's just not satisfied unless he can assist our customers. During the 2021 freeze, Cory worked for days on end with few breaks ensuring a customer's water remained on. Driving on icy roads, Cory turned off water pipes to homes that had burst to reduce damages and loss of water. Though the weather was horrendous, Cory responded with a team of Dripping Springs WSC operators ensuring the system remained operational including assisting the Operations Manager to maintain the SCADA system's communication. His most recent example of going

above and beyond for customers was providing a contractor assistance to help keep the water on for an elderly couple whose hot water heater failed. Cory's quick thinking and knowledge allowed him to recognize a solution that would allow the contractor to bypass the hot water heater until it could be replaced the next day. You see, Cory exudes the definition of the word "operator" with his mastery of skills and the DNA of an unbreakable chain.

I'm sure your selection will be hard as there are many excellent lead water operators across this great state of ours and you've received many excellent letters and recommendations, but honoring Cory Taylor will be different for you, as this year you will be recognizing the best of the best. I invite and encourage you to meet Cory and see what makes him so different from the pack. I'm confident that if you do, you will understand why our staff and our customers think so highly of him.